

The Future of the 'New Politics': a European Perspective

Chris Rootes

It is now more than twenty years since the student revolts in Europe and North America excited hopes (and fears) that the revolutionary transformation of the advanced societies was at hand. Then it was earnestly debated whether insurrections of the French or Russian type were likely or possible or whether some new form of revolutionary change was more probable.

At the end of the 1980s it is the Green movement which has seized the imagination of those who hanker after political change. Millions join environmental organisations, Green Parties win seats in legislatures, the 'green wave' is said to be about to engulf the advanced societies and the tea-leaves are again being read for signs of the fundamental transformation of political systems.

In many respects this latest wave of the 'new politics' is simply the continuation of that of the 1960s and 1970s before the social movements of those years were displaced by the economic recession induced by the oil crisis. The 'fourth wave'¹ is, like the protest generation of the late 1960s, concerned with social issues and matters of principle and with demands for participation and self-expression rather than the 'old politics' of preoccupation with economic growth and physical security.

But there are differences. Environmental issues were less prominent in the late 1960s and their development in the 1970s was truncated by a recession that made arguments about ecologically imposed 'limits to growth'² look academic. The radical

ecology movements today have a more coherent and a more comprehensive agenda than did their forerunners, not least because they more effectively link issues of moral principle and physical survival, most particularly in respect of nuclear weapons and nuclear energy.

Another, and no less important difference, is that the present wave of 'new politics' is essentially post-marxist. The 1960s wave began, especially in North America, in virtual ignorance of marxism and, in the course of its development, 'discovered' marxism and was comprehensively seduced by the rhetoric and theory of the master-thinker of nineteenth century political economy or, worse, by the veterans of the marxist sects that had survived from the 1940s.³ The political costs of the movements' turn to marxism, the

complete failure of the rejuvenated marxist parties, the aridity of the academic marxism they helped spawn and the crises, economic, political and environmental, of the socialist states of Eastern Europe and Asia make it most unlikely that marxism will so distract the present movement; thus inoculated against marxism, it is more likely to be the agent of durable political innovation.

But let us examine the 'new politics' more closely. Central to the 'new politics' is a political agenda which emphasises social issues and demands for participation and self-expression



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This pattern of values directly implies an increase in people's interest in participating in the political process to raise issues that concern them and to seek means, even unorthodox means, of setting them upon the decision-making agenda. It has long been recognised that the better-educated and the more affluent are more prone to participate and the present surge of interest in participation is in part simply a reflection of rising levels of education and affluence.⁵

The readiness to embrace even unorthodox political tactics does not necessarily imply a fundamental hostility to liberal democracy, but it does reflect both some dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of representative democratic institutions and a principled preference for more directly participatory forms. More particularly, it reflects discontent with the ability of traditional political parties effectively to represent or to translate people's real interests into policy alternatives.

The result is not merely a proliferation of protest movements, extra-parliamentary organisations and new political parties, but a change in the nature of people's allegiance to political parties: increasingly, how people vote looks to be less a matter of the declaration of solidarity with class or religious confession and more a matter of choice on the basis of political issues.

How 'new' is the 'new politics'? None of the issues that inspire present campaigns and protests is entirely novel: the peace movement has a long pedigree and even environmental protest is not without precedent. Certainly the most general of the 'new politics' issues — the concern with civil liberties and the right to increased participation in economic and political life and the preparedness to set them above economic and security con-

siderations — are not unprecedented. They do, however, seem now to be unprecedentedly popular by the standards of modern industrialised societies.

But this, surely, is the point: taking any reasonable historical perspective, it is the relentless materialism of the politics of the recent past which appears exceptional. What we now see as a 'new politics' is in fact a reaction against a politics which, ever since the Industrial Revolution, has been increasingly narrowly focussed upon material issues. The welfare state, far from being an aberration in that progress, was in fact its logical result, as even the language of political reform became translated into purely materialist terms. What has been lost is that sense of openness and possibility of a politics of principle and genuine participation that was (briefly) present at the birth of modern political systems. Those systems, whether liberal-democratic or socialist, have, in the process of attempting to institutionalise liberty and democracy, mislaid much of their substance and their vitality. What we see now is an attempt to recover them.

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Much has been made of the loose organisational structures of the new movements and parties and the priority they accord to mass participation even at the expense of efficiency and effectiveness.⁶ It is, however, doubtful whether this is an essential characteristic of these movements and parties rather than simply a reflection of their novelty and the fact that they are as yet in a 'nascent' rather than fully institutionalised condition.⁷ The development of the German Greens suggests as much: as the prospect of participation in government increases, so the 'realists' have triumphed over the 'fundamentalists'.

In order to be effective, the new movements may increasingly be obliged to transform themselves into formal political parties but if, as seems probable, these parties gradually lose many of the organisational features which are regarded as a key compo-

nent of their novelty, the 'new politics' may prove more durable and more universal than the new parties. We may from time to time see innovations in the movement, or party manifestations of the 'new politics', unless or until the core institutions of the political system are changed to better accommodate the desire to participate. We have already seen how different political systems are more or less open to the development of new political parties⁸ and new social movements.⁹

If we take the new movements or the new parties as the prime indicator of the 'new politics', we risk confusing what is substantial in and essential to the 'new politics' with features that are merely indicative, contingent and, ultimately, temporary. The **essence** of the 'new politics' is the expansive desire to participate and to put matters of principle ahead of material concerns. The **forms** of political participation — the expansion of political repertoires to embrace peaceful protest as well as the full range of conventional tactics and the more conditional allegiance to political parties — flow from them. Which form will predominate in a particular country will be determined largely by the constellation of obstacles and opportunities, both structural and historically contingent, which prevails in that country at any given time. Thus the fact that the German Greens have a twelfth of the seats in the Bundestag whereas the British Greens have not a single MP indicates not that the West German public is more environmentally conscious than the British so much as that the West German proportional representation electoral system is both hospitable and financially generous to new political parties by comparison with the British (or American) first-past-the-post single-member constituency system. In other words, the success of the German Greens is in large part attributable to structural features of the West German political system.¹⁰

Equally important, however, are such historically contingent factors as the balance of political competition and the lines of political division within a society at a particular time: a new party is less likely to flourish if it appears at a time when the political arena is highly competitive and especially if there is already a relatively successful non-traditional party in the

system, particularly if the issues which the new party addresses are already well-represented within the existing parties. The fact that the West German Green movement had, until recently, no parallel in Britain mainly reflected the fact that both nuclear energy and weapons issues were frozen out of mainstream politics in West Germany whereas they were taken up by and closely identified with the Labour Party in Britain. Whereas the Greens have been the novelty of the West German political scene in the 1980s, in Britain that role fell to the Social Democratic and Liberal Parties whose Alliance not only won parliamentary seats but the votes of a quarter of the electorate and, briefly, opinion poll ratings over 50%; there was, on the already crowded British political stage, simply no room for the Greens to play a starring role.¹¹

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How rapidly such patterns can change when some of the constraints are relaxed is demonstrated by the spectacular rise of the British Green Party in the June 1989 elections to the European Parliament: though it won them no seats, their 15% of the vote was the highest in the EC. Yet no British Green candidate had previously scored over 4% of the vote. What had changed? Firstly, the election was for members to a Parliament few voters know or care much about; secondly, barely a third of the electorate bothered to vote; thirdly, the Conservative Party ran a negative and unpopular campaign which coincided with the effects of both its own environmental protection campaigns (especially the promotion of unleaded petrol) and a series of alarms and scandals (especially about water quality); fourthly, the Labour Party, in its bid to make itself electable, had recently discarded its support for nuclear disarmament; and fifthly, the centre parties which, as the Alliance, had in 1987 captured a quarter of the vote, were in disarray and could no longer mobilise the centrist protest vote.

In other words, in June 1989 the

combination of circumstances favoured the British Greens as never before and one effect of their good showing was a massive rise in their popularity, with half the electorate saying they might be prepared to vote for them. It is unlikely that they will, partly because in future the more radical of the party's 'Dark Green' policies will get more media exposure, but mainly because the conditions of political competition will change by the time of the next general election.

A similar pattern of structural and historically contingent factors operates in Australia. It is only in the Senate and in the Tasmanian parliament, for which elections are by a form of proportional representation and so are relatively open to new parties, that the 'new politics' has found direct parliamentary representation. The single-member electorate system which prevails elsewhere in Australia presents practically insuperable obstacles to new parties. Nevertheless, frustration might have triumphed over realism had not the Australian Labor Party (ALP) at national level managed to retain just enough credibility over such 'new politics' issues as the environment and aboriginal land rights to appear clearly preferable to an aggressive 'new right' opposition which has maintained a studied hostility to such issues. Such circumstances constrain the partisans of the 'new politics' to working within or tolerating an existing party out of the recognition that it is preferable to its leading competitor in a system in which only the major parties have much chance of winning elections.

Because of the intensity of the structural obstacles to the success of new parties, especially in such countries as Britain, the United States and Australia, it is in the reshaping of political agenda that the 'new politics' has been and probably will continue to be most successful. Most often this will occur because the political entrepreneurs in existing parties, anxious to keep one jump ahead of the competition, will try to spot emerging trends in public opinion and remodel party platforms to take maximum advantage of them.

This is most easily done by pragmatic, populist parties which wear their ideological and intellectual baggage lightly: the ALP is perhaps the most adroit of all parties in this respect, with its election campaigns organised

and targetted precisely in response to its pollsters' findings.

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The recent 'greening' of the British Conservative Party provides another example. The spectacular 'conversion' of Margaret Thatcher came in October 1988 when she told the party faithful that no generation had a freehold on the planet but merely a 'full repairing lease' and that the Conservative Party was best placed to fulfil the obligations of that lease. In view of her government's record of hostility to European Community moves to protect the environment¹², the speech was a sensational surprise but it was overwhelmingly popular with the party.

Part of the reason is that, traditionally, environmentalism in Britain has been the essentially conservative project of protecting from the ravages of industrialism the countryside and historic towns and villages which are the very heartland of the Conservative Party. While the British economy stagnated, the threats to the historic environment were piecemeal but with the economic revival of the late 1980s, environmental pressures became most acute in the boom areas of the already affluent South. As a result, local environmental protests were often led by Conservatives and hitherto 'establishment' countryside organisations became outspokenly radical.

The Conservative leadership could only have failed to notice the growth of the discontent if it had been utterly blinkered by its laissez-faire ideology. Conservative politicians are, however, more convinced than most that retention of office is the paramount political objective, and by this manoeuvre the Conservatives sought to protect their flank against an environmentalist resurgence of the centre parties. The fact that there is a contradiction between the 'development-by-deregulation' of right-wing economic policy and the need of regulation to protect the environment against the consequences of such development proved no great embarrassment to a party for which power counts for more than ideological coherence.

Socialist parties, by contrast, are doubly hamstrung. In the first place, they are propelled by ideological commitment and part of socialist ideology dictates that economic development is essential to the betterment of the condition of the working class. Secondly, they are encumbered by quasi-democratic decision-making processes which limit the leaderships' room for tactical manoeuvre and give entrenched trade union interests considerable power.

In the British case, the Labour Party is especially disadvantaged by its historical indifference to the environmental matters which most animate the present 'green wave'. Even before the decline of agricultural labour removed a large rural working-class constituency, the Labour Party viewed the countryside as a resource for urban consumption, either as a source of cheap food or as a leisure park for the urban masses.¹³ Even the party's half-hearted conversion to opposition to nuclear energy owes more to the lobbying efforts of the National Union of Mineworkers than to environmental enlightenment. Now that the party has placed the environment on its agenda, there is a chasm between its environmentalist rhetoric and its economic policy so vast that socialist environmentalists are quite dismayed.¹⁴

The dilemma is a familiar one: how to satisfy the economic demands of the party's large, but shrinking, working-class constituency whilst at the same time convincingly addressing the environmentalist concerns of the growing 'new' middle classes whose votes Labour must win to regain office. It was precisely this dilemma that plagued the German SPD and allowed the Greens the space to develop. Now, in West Germany, a Red-Green coalition is offered as the only prospect of an alternative to conservative rule.

Whatever the considerable difficulties of such coalitions, the British Labour Party — and, indeed, the ALP — face the even more difficult task of building a convincing Red-Green coalition **within** the Labour Party, a coalition, in effect, between two sets of ideologically sophisticated but frequently conflicting interests. It is especially difficult because the environmental issue of most symbolic concern to the middle-classes — the countryside — is one about which the urban working classes are relatively

indifferent¹⁵ whilst almost no-one has effectively addressed the critical issue of the urban environment.¹⁶

The 'turquoise compromise' of the Conservative Party looks positively tranquil by contrast. Yet, ultimately, it is even more riven with contradictions, for if the contradiction for socialists is great between the effects of economic development and the costs of environmental protection, it is even greater between environmental protection and the **deregulated** economic development preferred by the new Conservative ideologues. Environmental protection requires regulation, regulation presupposes collective purpose and collective purpose ultimately implies a collectivist or at least cooperative ethic that is at odds with the radical individualism of 'new right' ideology. For the Conservatives, this implies a return to the non-ideological pragmatism of 'one-nation' Toryism that Thatcher and the 'new right' have been seeking to eradicate. Since it is increasingly obvious that environmental crisis and pollution are no resisters of the boundaries of nation-states, it implies, too, an increased commitment to international cooperation and, ultimately, supra-national government that is again the antithesis of 'new right' nationalism.

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In other words, the imperatives of environmental protection appear increasingly to expose the Achilles' heel of 'new right' ideology: it offers no ideologically coherent policy for responding to environmental problems, and because all the indications are that ecological issues will dominate politics for at least the next decade, 'new right' ideology, if it survives at all, seems likely to be the rhetorical window-dressing of conservative parties with about as much relevance to practical politics as the theories of Karl Marx have to the government of the Soviet Union.

For socialist the problems are great but theoretically they are not insuperable. An ecologically viable socialism might possibly be constructed, although it would more closely resemble 'primitive communism' or utopian socialism than anything the advanced world has seen. One difficulty socialists face is that of abandoning the productivism and materialism that have characterised socialism ever since Karl Marx poured buckets of cold water over utopian socialists who dared to believe that ethical principles rather than material ambition might conceivably shape human destiny. Another is the abandonment of statism, adopted as a 'quick fix' to speed up the construction of socialism and ever after an addiction that has thwarted socialism's ostensible purpose: the enhancement of human dignity. Neither of these old habits dies easily and it is likely that only with the greatest reluctance will new generations of environmentally conscious activists take on the renovation of the battered hulks of the traditional left rather than fashion new craft to navigate the political waters.

The upshot is that conditions are ripe for the development of new political vehicles which reflect the ecological thinking that is the most general manifestation of the 'new politics'. Where the structural obstacles to entirely new parties are particularly obdurate, changes of no less importance are likely in both the agenda and the machinery of existing parties and institutions.

It is quite improbable that either the radical individualism of 'new right' conservatism or the statism and productivism of traditional socialism will or can offer plausible policy responses to ecological crises. Instead, political conflicts are likely to take place on a battlefield whose broad contours are shaped by the wholism of ecological consciousness.

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It is most unlikely that increasingly highly educated populations will

remain content with bureaucratic political organisations whose democracy is often merely formal. Where starting new parties seems likely to be ineffective, people will demand the democratisation of the old and they will not be content to be tightly bound by the collective discipline of old-style socialist parties. Continuing the tendency of recent decades, successful parties are likely to be characterised less by mass membership than by mass participation. In any case, national political parties will increasingly appear as relics of a previous epoch.

The imperatives of the environment mean that nationalism and the nation-state itself are likely to be undermined by new arrangements at local, regional and international levels, and this is increasingly reflected in the forms of organisation of parties themselves. The 'new politics' parties are loose federations of local parties but with strong international connections whilst older parties, in Europe at least, are increasingly drawn into loose transnational party groupings.

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It is possible to imagine an authoritarian response to the Earth's environmental crisis but that, on balance, is unlikely: existing elites have not the imagination, the will nor the power to impose the solutions beloved of science fiction writers. There is instead a better than even chance that new arrangements reflecting an unprecedented awareness of global interdependence and mutual responsibility will also satisfy increasing demands for autonomy and participation. Rising levels of education, the progressive globalisation of communication and information and the impact on popular consciousness of the crisis of the Earth's ecosystem itself combine to make pressures for solutions consistent with the principles of the 'new politics' unprecedentedly great and those solutions themselves unprecedentedly practicable.

Despite the gloom of a decade whose political ethos has in many countries been dominated by the ascendancy of the 'new right', there has in fact been some progress toward these goals. The European Community, for example, has long ceased to be merely a customs union and comes increasingly to realise the political aspiration of its founders that rival European nationalisms should never again destroy the lives of Europeans. The fact that the economic vehicle of this unprecedentedly successful project of transnational cooperation is uncomfortable for a few relatively rich food-exporting countries like Australia does not detract from the real achievements of the Community in the areas of justice, international relations and the environment.¹⁷ Less tangible but real enough is the way Western Europe is becoming, in line with Green aspirations, a community of regions rather than merely of nation states.

Other ventures in international cooperation are more ambiguous or less palpable, partly because the institutional machinery which sustains them is either under-developed or, as in the case of the United Nations, excessively bureaucratic, but generally the omens are encouraging. Even in the Soviet bloc, whose bureaucratic immobility and paranoia has so damaged UN agencies, there is a tidal wave of change which, however fragile, is thoroughly in line with 'new politics' concerns. The extension of this revolution in the East is perhaps the most important consideration in the future of the 'new politics' for if it succeeds the few remaining props will have been knocked from under the 'old politics' of the West.

NOTES

1. Johan Galtung 'The Fourth Political Wave', *Social Alternatives*, 8(1), 1989: 31-33.
2. The title of the celebrated ecological critique of economic development produced by the Club of Rome (London: Pan, 1974).
3. For an account of parallel developments in (a) Western Europe, see Gianni Statera *Death of a Utopia* (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1975) and (b) Australia, see C.A. Rootes 'The Development of Radical Student Movements and their Sequelae', *Australian Journal of Politics & History*, 34(2), 1988: 173-186.
4. For more comprehensive attempts to characterise the 'new politics', see Thomas Poguntke 'New Politics and Party Systems: the Emergence of a New Type of Party?', *West European Politics*, 10(1), 1987: 76-88, and T. Poguntke 'The "New Politics" Dimension in European Green Parties', pp.175-194 in Fer-

dinand Muller-Rommel (ed.) *New Politics in Western Europe: the Rise and Success of Green Parties and Alternative Lists* (Boulder: Westview, 1989).

5. Samuel Barnes, Max Kaase et al, *Political Action* (London: Sage, 1979).
6. Poguntke, *op. cit.* (1987).
7. Francesco Alberoni *Movement and Institutions* (N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1984).
8. Herbert Kitschelt 'Left-libertarian Parties: explaining innovation in competitive party systems', *World Politics*, XL(2), 1988.
9. On anti-nuclear movements, see especially Herbert Kitschelt 'Political Opportunity Structures and Political Protest: anti-nuclear movements in four democracies', *British J. of Political Science*, 16(1), 1986: 57-85.
10. West Germany has a federal political system in which state elections are unsynchronised. As a result, a new party may enter the parliamentary arena by winning seats in a single state legislature and does not have to undertake the more daunting task of first entering the national parliament. This is a greater advantage than it is in the superficially similar Australian system because the upper house of the West German federal parliament, the Bundesrat, is composed of delegates of the state governments and, more importantly, because the geographical compactness of the country makes the politics of any one state more immediately relevant to the others than is true in more geographically dispersed countries.

The West German electoral system is a variant of proportional representation: each voter has two votes, one for a representative of a single member constituency and the 'second vote' for a party list from which members are chosen to make the overall composition of the parliament proportional to the votes cast for parties gaining at least 5% of the total vote. This 5% threshold, designed to exclude extremist parties, is at once an obstacle to new parties and an incentive to them since it is not unattainable but encourages small groups to cooperate and to form new, more inclusive political vehicles in order to maximise their chances of success. The system is generous to new parties in that it gives them state financial aid in proportion to the votes they attract.

All of these factors have been reflected in the rise of the Greens: they first entered the parliamentary arena and gained national prominence by winning just 5% of the vote in the smallest state (Bremen), all their MPs have been elected by the 'second vote' rather than in constituency contests, the fragility of their surplus over the 5% threshold has been a disincentive to splinter groups, despite serious doctrinal differences, and the party receives considerably more of its income from the state than it does from its members.

11. For a more extended version of this argument, see C.A. Rootes 'The New Politics: accounting for British exceptionalism', *European J. of Political Research* (forthcoming).
12. See, e.g., the testimony of former EC Environment Commissioner, Stanley Clinton Davis: 'Emergency Earth', *New Socialist*, August/September 1989: 16-17.

13. Andrew Flynn **Rural Working-Class Interests in Party Policymaking in Postwar England** (Ph.D., University College, London, 1989): ch. 4.
14. Michael Jacobs 'Green Dilemma', **New Socialist**, August/September 1989: 11-13.
15. Ken Young 'Interim Report: Rural Prospects' and A. Heath & G. Evans 'Working-class Conservatives and middle-class Socialists' in R. Jowell et al (eds) **British Social Attitudes: the 5th Report** (Aldershot: Gower, 1989).
16. Peter Christoff 'A Long Drought Ahead?: The Environment Movement and Strategies for Change in the 80s', **Social Alternatives**, 6(4), 1987: 27. Before its abolition, the Greater London Council under its left-wing leader, Ken Livingstone, actually had a good record for innovation in urban environmental matters.
17. Christopher Tugendhat **Making Sense in Europe** (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987).

The Australian Mind

Vengeance is mine!
says the Australian mind.

Prime real estate begs
a view that's clear.
Let nature not nurture
a foliage proliferating
beyond
a well-trained hedge.

People like to walk
triple file
unhindered.
Trees must not project
forcing their levelling
while in full bloom.

And when a car
needs room
to race
a space
must be made
wide and clear
hazard not mountain nor forest.

For the needs of Australians
are GREAT!
Their rights
supreme.
Their time
money.
And nature's
a bother.

Linda Eisler

The Maledictions

Unhappily we kneel in Y's and johns,
for theirs is the church hall.
Unhappily we are arrested and thrown
into prison, for theirs is the law
as well as the court.
Unhappily are we called **queer, lezzy, punk,**
faggot, nellie, queen . . . ; for theirs
are the media.
Unhappily are we diagnosed neurotic, narcissistic,
OEdipal, and "arrested,"
for theirs is the money when we pay the bill.
Unhappily are we accused of child molestation,
corrupting the young, and destroying the
family, for they are our mothers, our fathers,
our sisters and brothers.
Unhappily are we tempted with rewards
for every time that we might betray
our sisters and brothers,
for we are spirit of their spirit,
flesh from their flesh.
Unhappily are we comfortable and rich
and educated and integrated with straits,
for we have to hide the truth.
Unhappily are we praised for our sensitivity,
for our artistry, for our humor,
for our intelligence, and for our sweetness;
we hurt and grow loudly angry,
for so humored they our gay ancestors
before genocide.
We are indeed the salt of the earth,
in a world sickening from saltlessness.
We are the light of the world,
revealing the secrets of the heart,
offering obvious witness
of what it is to be whole.

Li Min Hua